

Provisions for the Schooling
of the blind and partially
blind.

Edward M. Van Cleve.

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BLIND AND PARTIALLY BLIND

EDWARD M. VAN CLEVE

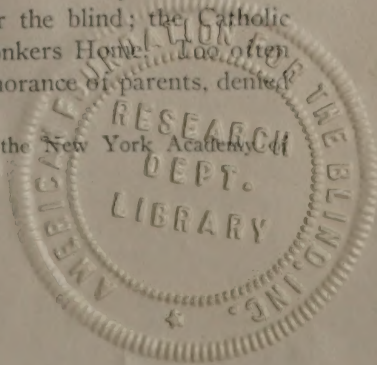
Principal of the New York Institute for the Education of the Blind

NEW YORK

When the skilled ophthalmologist, despite his faithful use of all his powers, finds his patient losing such vision as he may have; or when the operation which had been indicated and was performed has resulted disastrously; when blindness is imminent or has actually come, the question is always "What next?" The patient himself may ask it, and the great-hearted physician wishes he might give comfort and encouragement in the face of disaster. If the patient is an adult and a professional man, let him know that if sight is lost all is not necessarily lost, for there are many ways in which blind men and women may live happy and useful lives. To help in just such crises there have been formed such associations as the New York Association for the Blind, commonly known as the Lighthouse, the Industrial Home for Blind Men, and the Marie Bloede Workshop for Blind Women of Brooklyn, the Queensboro Workers for the Blind, and others, in this great city.

But if the question "What next?" is asked by the parents of a child there is at once a very prompt and properly acceptable answer, and it is particularly to the formulation of this reply that I am to attempt on this occasion as comprehensive treatment as time and your patience may afford. Schools for the child who is blind or has vision too greatly reduced to make its use in reading books of ordinary-sized type practicable are provided, and an education as good as the seeing brother and sister may obtain, or even a better education, for that matter, is afforded through the intervention of the state or city or private enterprise. The ophthalmologist should know what means there are for making the child's chance for schooling immediately available and where he may advise the parents to turn for securing the special training called for by loss of vision. In our city there are: the New York Institute for the Education of the Blind, the organization longest in the field, the first school of its type to open in the United States, founded in 1831, beginning its work in 1832, and continuously serving its purpose for nearly one hundred and three years; the public school classes for the blind; the Catholic Institute for the Blind; the Jewish Guild's Yonkers Home. Too often a child who has lost his sight is, through the ignorance of parents, denied

Read before the Section of Ophthalmology of the New York Academy of Medicine, Feb. 8, 1935.



the privilege of having a schooling that will give him a chance to win a position of happiness and usefulness in the community. Yet there are the means ready at hand.

Again, through the enlightened services of organizations such as I have named and under leadership provided through the educational activities of the National Society for the Prevention of Blindness, there are arrangements of a special nature for the schooling of children of low vision in the so-called sight-conservation classes of the public schools. There is a stage of visual acuity and ocular condition at which the ophthalmologist advises less use of the eyes than the ordinary school-room work requires; perhaps 20/100 is the best vision the patient has and he is able to read Jaeger's test type 6—he is not blind, yet he should use his eyes with extreme care. For him and others with various degrees of vision and various conditions of the eyes the city provides classes where in small groups and with special teachers a kind of training may be had which will serve his need and save his visual powers from further deterioration. A special technic in this field has been developed in this city and devoted friends of the movement, along with city physicians, make possible the routing of children who should attend sight-saving classes instead of continuing to struggle to get on in the regular classes of seeing children. This subject of conservation of vision calls for more detailed consideration than can be given here.

I turn, then, to the blind child, who must use for his schooling some other means of knowing the world and its ways than those possible through vision. The parents have been brought to believe that all has been done for him by the professional man that can be done, and the ophthalmologist has advised the special school and given the parents the name and address of the principal. An interview is arranged with the chief teacher, and this reveals to the parents that Harry has before him, even though he is visually underprivileged, the opportunity to develop his whole nature—head, hands, heart, body—and arrangements are made for his entrance on a course of training that may last ten, twelve, fourteen years and result in a well rounded, efficient, satisfactory preparation for meeting manhood's problems.

WORK OF THE NEW YORK INSTITUTE FOR THE EDUCATION
OF THE BLIND

Who may be admitted to the New York Institute for the Education of the Blind? We have one general rule: We accept any child whom we believe ourselves able to help, with no distinction of race, creed or social condition. He must be blind or have such defective vision as to make schooling in the usual way too difficult for him; he must be mentally capable, in reasonably good health and have, too, good moral character; and, a very important qualification, he must be *willing* to come to us and to do his best. One reason why we maintain so high a rating in

school accomplishment is because no child is ever *sent* to us, that is, compelled to attend by court or truant officer; he comes because his parents and he wish to make use of the rather unusual facilities we have to serve him. We provide schooling and board free; usually our pupils live so near that they go home for the week-ends, thus making possible for them intimate and continuous touch with the home, their friends out of school, their church. We are very chary of our character as a school—strictly and solely a school; we are not an institution in the narrow sense of that term, only in its large and generic sense. We assume custodial care of no child. Our function is no different from that of the first-class boarding school in which parents enter their children for training. There is no "institutionizing" of our young people. It is a free school, however, and no charge is made for tuition or board. It is supported by voluntary contributions, by income from gifts and legacies accumulated through nearly one hundred years, and by per capita allowances from the states of New York and New Jersey at present and a very small annual per capita contribution of the city of New York made to us as a corporate school.

Before a pupil is received we are assured that he is eligible as a blind or partially blind person through the very generous assistance of our ophthalmologist, Dr. Bernard Samuels, who sees all candidates and either makes examination *de novo* or confirms the reported visual condition given to the principal by the parents who make application. Let me also say that as principal of the institute I am indebted to the members of the Section of Ophthalmology of the New York Academy of Medicine for helpful cooperation in connection with the admission of children who have been their patients.

It is through the examination of our pupils by our ophthalmologist that I am able year by year to make up reliable statistics as to causes of blindness. In many instances schools like ours lack the expert analyses which we fortunately have and, therefore, their statistics are not so accurate or worth while.

It is our privilege to take the blind child of 7 and through such training as has been found most appropriate for him to fit him for life's contacts and achievements. It would be advantageous were some pre-school training of an intelligent character provided; parents of a blind child are not always wise and usually in tenderness spoil the so-called afflicted one; we welcome, therefore the opportunity to advise with the parents of a child who will be obliged to use the facilities of our school if we can become acquainted with the child and them a year or more before the age of entrance. Likewise, when the incidence of blindness or partial loss of sight occurs in later childhood, it is an advantage for us to know the situation before we receive the pupil. The ophthalmologist will serve his patient and us if he will but bring us together ahead of the absolutely needful time.

What does a school for the blind do for its clientele? In general, it follows the courses of study for sighted pupils of the public schools, and the institute carries on its service through the usual elementary grades and through the high school to prepare such as are capable even for college entrance. Our pupils take the examinations of the regents of the University of the State of New York, the only allowance made for their sightless condition being the provision of an amanuensis when necessary, and the record of achievement in this particular of scholarship is one of which the institute is properly proud. And, I may add, our pupils who have gone to college are for the most part successful in their pursuit of higher education. But the school does more than train brains; it recognizes the obligation to develop body, hand and spirit.

Physically a sightless child is likely to be subnormal and needs exercise and directed development even more than the seeing one. From the first and throughout all the years of his schooling the blind boy is under the regimen of well organized gymnasium training, playground exercise and athletic sports, so that physically he becomes quite as capable as if he saw. Our young fellows hold field meets and wrestling matches with teams of seeing boys and win or lose like the good sportsmen they are.

Manual training in the institute is much more extensive in program and achievement than in the regular school; we give more time to it; we emphasize and appreciate its special value for blind people. Many of the things we seeing people do are pure imitation, and we do not need to be taught; the sightless student lacks this help which is inspiration and spur as well as pattern; he must be taught to handle his world of things. This is quite evidently necessary in his mastery of tools and their use. People see our boys fashioning articles of wood or iron or what not and exclaim in wonder; the admiration is rather misplaced—not what is made but the pupil's power and willingness to receive the training and the ability, patience and skill of the teacher are the appropriate objects of amazement. Weaving of beautiful and useful fabrics with development of taste in their making, basketry and other forms of hand work are taught; then our girls become proficient with the needle and the sewing machine and with the other tools of women's hand activities, and they learn to cook, too; and by all these means they make themselves efficient members of the family when they are at home.

In the field of education in art, the region in which the blind may be best exercised is that of music. Obviously any artistic development or expression that demands use of vision is out of their sphere. The great majority of people enjoy some form of musical outpouring, and the blind are not different from others in this particular. Perhaps because of their special limitation they are more susceptible to this means of emotional approach. But blindness does not render a girl or a boy more capable of producing a good quality of musical expression. Not all blind

children are capable of becoming musicians. As music is, however, a chief channel of artistic expression for the sightless, the institute provides that all the children may have opportunity to develop any latent powers of either appreciation or performance, and for the really musical a course of instruction through eight or ten years is available which in character as well as in extent is equivalent to a musical conservatory's program. Our public performances of musical compositions of even the highest class, such as the works of Beethoven, Chopin and Brahms and, most lately, the Christmas section of Handel's "Messiah," attest the capability, the ambition and the enjoyment of the best which our young people possess.

It would be an incomplete statement of what a school for the blind and the institute in particular does for its patrons if there were omitted reference to the development of the inner life. Throughout the years of schooling the pupils are subjected to influences, carefully fostered, that have for their purpose the building up of a kind of character that will appreciate and exemplify the admirable traits by which are distinguished the better and the best, the refined and cultured. Teachers who know how to deal with young people, who know more than what is in their books and who care for their pupils' growth into fine manhood and womanhood are sought out and kept in service without any pull, political or other. Housemothers who give attention to the physical needs of the children but also try to train them to right habits of living and thinking come into the closest of relationships with their charges and often prove most potent in developing the social qualities that all must cultivate. Religious instruction is not contemplated in the organization of a school that serves all groups of people without discrimination; but a high moral quality of spiritual intercourse is exemplified in morning and evening assembly with recognition of the Deity and our relationships to Him and to the higher things in song, reading and prayer, and in all the dealings of teachers and staff with the pupils.

What are the end-results of these efforts? Some children respond admirably and, living in school the normal sort of life contemplated in all our programs, come to be capable, happy, productive members of society. In their scholastic work they have been treated with the same consideration (and no more) as their sighted competitors in schools are shown. They take the examinations of the regents of the University of the State of New York, and through the forty-four years for which the statistics are available our students have maintained an enviable record of high scholarship. They have learned to use the typewriter and the dictaphone, to read and write with intelligence, as well as any high school boys and girls, and some have gone beyond this educational stage and entered college. Here they have usually acquitted themselves well, and a few have attained distinction, being graduated with honors.

and winning election to Phi Beta Kappa. It is not the function of the elementary and high school to produce artisans or artists, but to start the pupils on their way. Some use the hand processes they have been taught in school to do one sort or another of work when out of school; others find places where they may use their mental skill in service or personal growth and enjoyment. Specifically, in the last twenty years pupils have found occupation in these ways among others: as piano tuner, newspaper dealer, short story writer, operator of a small store, dictaphone operator and typist, switchboard operator, church organist, teacher of organ and of piano, private tutor, partner in a kindergarten, masseur, osteopath, minister of the gospel, attorney at law, director of an extensive trucking business, coal dealer, life insurance agent, radio entertainer, and social worker, especially in such service as is carried on by the Lighthouse and other like organizations.

In what I have said emphasis has been laid on the attention given to personality in our treatment of these young people; on the services that are rendered by the ophthalmologist, the teachers and the officers of the school, the state and the friends who have provided the means; on the growth and development of the children in mind, body, talent and spirit. Perhaps a few words should be said about equipment. Visitors to the institute are always very favorably impressed by the appearance of the buildings, by the beauty of their situation and surroundings, the campus and its landscaping. Looking further, they may see how admirably the needs of the blind children have been anticipated in the equipment with tools and appliances: the playgrounds have apparatus for free enjoyment and for directed physical training and athletics; the wood-working and iron-working rooms and the other manual training departments are places of well planned industry; there is a great library of books in braille, devices for writing both by hand and by machine, tangible maps and globes, typewriters, dictaphones, scientific apparatus, pianos (more than thirty of them Steinways, by the way, and three of them concert grand pianos), a fine pipe organ, various other devices for musical education, and a department for training young men in the tuning and repair of pianos. In short, there have been provided all the means known for complete and thorough development of the sightless children who come within the institute's walls.

ORIGIN OF THE INSTITUTE

It is a fine piece of philanthropy which was begun one hundred and four years ago by a young doctor who had already given his attention to helping the deaf, Samuel Akerly, associate and relative of the eminent physician Samuel Latham Mitchill, himself distinguished as physician and author, and Samuel Wood, Quaker, bookseller and publisher, progenitor of the Woods whose publications are recognized standard books in the medical world. Akerly and Wood secured the incorporation

of an institution to provide educational opportunities for blind children, and within a year there came into association with them a young physician who had just returned from Athens where he had given his services to the Greeks in their struggle for independence from the Turk, Dr. John Dennison Russ; this youthful, enthusiastic philanthropist offered his services as teacher and on March 15, 1832 began the first organized experiment on American ground of instructing the blind. In those days doubt was general that the blind could learn!

OUTSTANDING FIGURES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE INSTITUTE

A century of service and of progress is exemplified in the record and the standing of the New York Institute for the Education of the Blind. A noble company of servants of humanity are the men and women who have been drawn into the work of making plainer the way of the blind youth; besides Akerly and Wood and Russ, there were here in New York, John R. Stuyvesant, the Ketchums—Morris and Hiram, the Woods—Dr. Isaac and John and Edward, Anson G. Phelps and the Schermerhorns—Peter Augustus, Alfred and others of this notable family of philanthropists, James Boorman, merchant prince and college founder—these as founders and supporters; then as teacher and superintendent, James F. Chamberlain, whose benign reign was the most notable after the beginnings wrought by Russ, and for more than half a century William Bell Wait, a great educator and leader of national influence. Others who helped make the century's history notable were Dr. John D. Fisher and Samuel Gridley Howe and Michael Anagnos and Edward E. Allen in Boston; Friedlander and Chapin in Philadelphia; Morrison in Baltimore; Smead in Ohio; Bacon in Illinois, and all over the land faithful and devoted personalities whose services make today's achievements possible.

We have a better chance today to make plain the path of the blind than had our predecessors. We have not only the history and experience of these hundred years; we have the cooperation of many agencies, the sincere interest of friends and upholders, a high standing in the educational world and recognition from other professions, such as this you have here given by inviting a representative of the educational phase of dealing with blindness to present his case.

AN INVITATION

Dr. Samuels, my friend and staunch supporter, has frequently asked me to receive as visitors to the Institute representatives of his classes of students. He thinks they have been benefited by their contact with the work we do as they look forward to their professional career. We

very courteously and cordially invite you who have given your kind attention to this account of our work to come and see it in process. I invite you all, too, to know more about this organized tool of helpfulness through reading our year-book. I know that annual reports are a nuisance too often and reading them a weariness to the flesh; but in my story of the progress of our school's work I try to tell each year a bit of what is being accomplished and the pictures usually tell an interesting story; so I am not too reserved in recommending to you a perusal of our handsome year-book. We wish you to know the institute and be willing to send us promising pupils all the while.

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